DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 390 613 RC 020 397

AUTHOR Nommensen, Elisabeth
TITLE A Rural and Remote Children's Mobile Service--Wanaaring.
PUB DATE Jul 94
NOTE 6p.; In: Issues Affecting Rural Communities. Proceedings of an International Conference Held by the Rural Education Research and Development Centre (Townsville, Queensland, Australia, July 10-15, 1994); see RC 020 376.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Access to Education; Early Childhood Education; Early Intervention; Elementary Education; Foreign Countries; Geographic Isolation; Linking Agents; *Mobile Educational Services; *Outreach Programs; *Parent Education; *Program Development; *Rural Areas; Rural Education; Social Isolation; Socialization
IDENTIFIERS *Australia

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the Contact Children's Mobile, a program developed in 1987 to provide educational and social enrichment opportunities for children from birth to 12 years who live in a large remote region surrounding Wanaaring, Australia. Two teachers travel an average of 800 kilometers weekly to make home visits or hold daylong educational sessions for 75 families including 130 children. Families are visited once a month. The program provides playgroups, preschool sessions, after-school sessions, and vacation sessions. In addition, the program provides assistance, information, referrals, and support to rural families. Other program activities include promoting community awareness of child development and health issues, supporting local community activities, advocating relevant issues regarding rural families, and providing networks between mobile children's services statewide and nationally. During phase one of the program, the focus was on early childhood education and health promotion, along with the development of resource materials appropriate to the needs of the region. Phase two of the program focused on improving parenting skills and family self-management. During this phase the program was expanded to include a video series on parenting skills; booklets to supplement the video series; storybooks reflecting the identity of the region; and a daily radio program focusing on parenting ideas, discussion of health topics, and children's songs and stories. Additionally, the program has been closely involved in training, networking, and policy making regarding rural and remote mobile children's services, both statewide and nationally. (LP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 390 613

A RURAL AND REMOTE CHILDREN'S MOBILE SERVICE—WANAARING

Elisabeth Nommensen—Australia

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

D McSwan

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

RC 020 397

A RURAL AND REMOTE CHILDREN'S MOBILE SERVICE - WANAARING

Elisabeth Nommensen — Australia

ABSTRACT

The Contact Children's Mobile was established in 1987 by Contact Incorporated (Project for Isolated Children) based in Sydney. Funding was provided by the Bernard van Leer Foundation - an international philanthropic institution based in the Netherlands.

The Mobile aims:

- to provide educational and social enrichment opportunities for children aged from birth to twelve years (through playgroups, preschool sessions, afterschool and vacation sessions)
- to provide assistance, information, referrals and support to people caring for young children in geographically isolated circumstances
- to promote awareness of child development and health issues in the wider community

The field team is based in Wanaaring, 200 kilometres west of Bourke, population 60. The two teachers travel an average of 800 kilometres per week over unsealed roads in a specially equipped Landcruiser, making home visits or holding day-long sessions on remote properties or at local community venues.

The region covered by the Mobile is an area the size of Tasmania (or Belgium and The Netherlands together) and straddles both sides of the far north west New South Wales and far south west Queensland state border. The border is marked by a two meter high "Dingo" fence.

The seventy-five families (130 children) are seen only once per month, so the team also concentrates on disseminating information through the post, loaning toys, books, cassettes, and videos to parents, and compiling a *WHO TO CONTACT* list of agencies that these remote families may access by telephone.

The project has been monitored closely by the Bernard van Leer Foundation so that it may be used as a model for similar services worldwide. An independent evaluator, Dr Ailsa Burns, from Macquarie University, has presented a regular report on the field work. Using data from staff reports, session evaluations, written parent surveys and parent interviews, a Summary Report of the project was compiled in September 1993. This marked the changeover to funding by the Australian Government (once van Leer's establishment funding ceased) after strong lobbying by affected families.

The following recommendations were highlighted:

1 that the programme continue to work towards the aims as set
2 that maintaining liaison with local, state and federal government bodies and other relevant agencies be given high priority (especially with regard to health, education, and community service issues affecting the border region)
3 that the project be managed and administered regionally by the community it serves and that an appropriate management structure be established
4 that networks continue to be promoted and consolidated between remote mobile services to both statewide and nationally

To compensate for distance and to enable the service to reach the wider community the mobile team:

- sponsors a morning *PARENTING* segment on 2WEB Outback Radio
- produces a *KIDS PAGE* in the Bourke Western Herald and in local community newspapers
- sets up activities and displays at Agricultural Field Days, and arranges seminars and visits by Health Specialists to remote communities

The challenge for the team is to coordinate schedules and projects and liaison with:

- two Royal Flying Doctor bases (Charleville, Qld and Broken Hill, NSW)
- four Schools of Distance Education (Charleville, Qld and Broken Hill, Dubbo and Bourke, NSW)
- three local one-teacher schools (Thargomindah, Eulo, Qld and Wanaaring, NSW)
- local and regional health and community service representatives

The Contact Children's Mobile attended in April 1994, the *NATIONAL REMOTE MOBILES MUSTER* in Alice Springs, where over thirty similar services from every state gathered to exchange information and to set the groundwork to establish an Australia-wide association for such services. This conference was jointly funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation and Federal Department of Human Services and Health. Issues that affect rural and remote communities and ways in which the field services may use available resources to address them were high on the agenda.

The Contact Children's Mobile was established in 1987 by Contact Incorporated (Project for Isolated Children) based in Sydney. Funding was provided by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, based in the Netherlands. This international philanthropic institution funds innovative services in Australia and overseas countries to promote the development of young children and their families. The Foundation was pleased to monitor the success of the Mobile in terms of increased access and equity for the target population in the event that it may be used as a model for similar children's services.

The remote region serviced by the Mobile is an area larger than 36,000 square kilometres[1]. One unique aspect is that the scattered target population live on both sides of the two-metre high 'Dingo Fence' that aligns with the far-western state border of New South Wales and Queensland.

The field team is based centrally within the target region in the tiny outback village of Wanaaring, 200 kilometres west of Bourke, population 60. The two teachers travel an average of 800 kilometres per week over unsealed roads in a four-wheel drive vehicle, making home visits or holding day-long sessions on remote properties or at local community venues.

THE CONTACT CHILDREN'S MOBILE AIMS:

i) to provide educational and social enrichment opportunities for children aged from birth to twelve years (through playgroups, preschool sessions, afterschool and vacation sessions)
ii) to provide assistance, information, referrals and support to people caring for young children in geographically isolated circumstances
iii) to promote awareness of child development and health issues in the wider community
iv) to support local community activities and advocate on behalf of rural and remote families on relevant issues
v) to promote networks between mobile children's services statewide and nationally.

During more than six years of operation the Mobile has developed through two major phases. Firstly, the pilot phase from 1987-1990 and secondly the consolidation phase of the existing service, from 1990-1993 with more specific objectives and extensions into new areas. Currently the service is in its third phase, a transition phase, from 1993. This is due to a change in funding body and management structure. Reports and evaluations of the first two phases were made by an independent evaluator, Dr Ailsa Burns, from Macquarie University, Sydney. As a result, the service has been continually refined according to the recognised needs of the community and the resources available both within and without the region.

The Contact Incorporated Coordinator, June Jeremy, presented the original submission to the Bernard van Leer Foundation in 1986. In the two years prior, her field work as Coordinator of Contact

RC 020397

Incorporated[2] (the eventual sponsoring body), involved visits and needs assessments regarding early childhood services in the far north west of New South Wales. In July 1987, the Mobile service received an initial funding grant for a pilot phase of three years. It was envisaged that an Australian funding institution would take over financial responsibility once the project was established.

During Phase One (1987-1990) the focus was on early childhood education and health promotion, along with the development of resource materials (books, videos, print media) appropriate to the needs of the region. The field team consisted of a qualified early childhood teacher and a registered nurse, with a project assistant providing part-time clerical support. A part-time radio presenter and technical officer were employed from outside the region to support the project. The Mobile was based in Wanaaring at the Lila Leigo Centre which had once been the Bush Hospital and later a children's hostel for out-of-town students attending the one-teacher local school. The Centre functioned well as office and living accommodation for the Mobile workers. The large yard also proved suitable for playgroup sessions which coincided with monthly Flying Doctor' visits to the next door clinics.

A specially-equipped Toyota Troop Carrier was used by staff to travel throughout the region and locate families with young children. The aim was to link these isolated families with young children together through a regular playgroup / preschool session at a central venue. Staff identified needs through consultation, interaction and evaluation of introductory programmes.

The Annual Report 1988-89 noted that the service was in recess over midsummer due to extreme temperatures (40-50 degrees) and unusually high rainfall led to closures for long periods of time after this season. Despite these setbacks the team was able to establish nine venues for sessions in Wanaaring and outlying stations and communities, during its first year of operation. A total number of 80 children were involved.

In order to assess the impact of the service on families in the region a workplan and evaluation procedure for the project was outlined and submitted to the Bernard van Leer Foundation in the first annual report.

The evaluation procedure was to involve:

i) assessing participation rates and developing an index to measure the quality of participation by children and families

ii) monitoring the development of parent self-help groups and the ways in which such activities become self supporting

iii) evaluating changes in children and parents (e.g. physical, social and nutritional aspects of development)

The Evaluation Report in Year Two redefined the procedures:

> "The programmed attracted not only preschoolers but also some older children who attended after school (in Wanaaring) or who juggled their School of the Air lessons so as to take part along with their younger siblings...some very young children also took part, including several babies...the number of children seen per month ranged between 22 and 69. Some children, and parents of course, attended multiple sessions per month, while some in the remoter areas were seen only monthly, or even less frequently. The complex and changing pattern of attendance raises major difficulties for evaluating the 'success' of the programme with participating children: (Another problem here was the lack of a 'control' group, since of course all children in this remote area were accepted into the programme). It was decided accordingly to define success in terms of mothers' perception that the program was aiding their children and themselves. A survey of families enrolled in the Contact Mobile programmes was therefore conducted in June-July 1984."

After statistics were compiled, it was considered vital for the team to plan and implement group and individualised programmes for day-long play and learning activity (allowing for one and a half hours' travel each way for some families). The Mobile sessions provided children with an opportunity to socialise with other children in their area and ensured equitable access to such services by the target population.

In the Phase One Summary Report, 1987-1990, parents commended both the cognitive and the social stimulation provided by the programme.

> "...93% felt that the programme had given their children 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' more interest in art and craft activities, 73% said the same in respect of music and dancing, 76% in respect of books and reading, 85% in respect of learning to get along better with other children, and 76% in respect of learning to do things as part of a group. Specific gains mentioned were learning to mix, to take turns, to share, to cooperate, to accept not being the centre of attention, to express feelings in art, to develop physical coordination...and to 'really enjoy themselves'."

In effect the team endeavoured to enhance the quality of life of these isolated children by provided **SPICE**, i.e. Social, Physical, Intellectual, Creative and Emotional opportunities.

At the end of 1989, the Commonwealth Department of Community Services and Health after receiving a submission, advised that it was unlikely to be in a position to consider funding the mobile service until 1993. It did acknowledge however, the value of such a service for the target region. The Bernard van Leer Foundation then agreed to fund a second phase of the project, 1990-1993.

One objective during this phase, as in the first, was to stimulate parents to improve parenting skills and family self-management. Staff constantly sought to reinforce the value of parents' role in the education of their children. Therefore parents as well as children were encouraged to make the most of the rare opportunities to interact with others from within a 100 kilometre radius.

In the first phase of the Mobile it was noted in the evaluation report that out of survey respondents:

> "...75% believed that Contact had given them 'lots' or 'quite a lot' more ideas about helping children learn things, 90% believed that they had given them at least some help in handling difficult behaviours, and 100% believed that getting ideas by watching the team at work was 'important' or 'very important'."

The value of sessions for mothers who were socially isolated themselves could not be underestimated (fathers, usually pastoral workers, were mostly unable to attend the midweek sessions). In the Phase Two Summary Report the evaluator reported that 100% of respondents to the 1993 survey believed the social contact for mothers was important or very important, 88% thought that Contact had brought families in the area into closer contact.

In a recent Australian survey of 12,000 rural women (Wahlquist 1993)4 it was identified that non-recognition of womens' 'contribution' and their inability to talk to other family members about their problems, were major stress factors. Dr Burns recommended in the Phase Two Summary Report that:

> "...in setting up a programme of this kind the possibility that mothers may need the programme as much or more than the children be borne in mind from the beginning."

When it is considered that the mothers in this target region are the primary caregivers and educators this is a relevant issue. The Contact Mobile sessions each month may be their only social contact with others in similar circumstances and an opportunity for 'time out' from their children.

As a result of this understanding over time the service delivery has altered to suit the caregivers' needs. In the early stages of the Mobile, the Health Worker addressed the parents regarding particular health topics in a formal discussion segment. The team later reported that major health problems in the area were quite well provided for by the existing services, i.e. Wanaaring Community Health Nurse and regular Flying Doctor and specialist visits throughout the region. The Mobile Health Worker position was phased out after two years and the field team comprised two qualified teachers after that time.

The formal segments were also phased out which enabled parents to interact more with other children and adults during the session. Many parents reported a preference for this change and seemed

more prepared to raise issues informally with other parents and team members. As a result earlier assessments and referrals were made and support provided as appropriate.

The field team consolidated these informal sessions with increased home visits wherever possible. These home visits strengthened the bond between staff, children and parents. They also enabled parents to raise their specific concerns in private, and provided a forum for open discussion regarding what the service could offer individual families. Suggestions and special requests by parents and carers were taken into account which enabled the session programme to be more integrated with family and individual needs. This regular portable activity, whether situated on grassy homestead lawns, treeless paddocks, dusty halls or small school yards, has been evolving as a more meaningful experience for all as a result.

The media component of the programme was a significant one in that it provided relevant materials for extending the programme into the home and enhancing and developing local parenting skills. Parents and children took part in the production of five videos from 1987-1989: *Talking Together, Lots to Learn, Songs for Kids, Growth and Care of Kids*, and *Play for Kids*. In 1993 a further series of five videos was produced entitled *Watch Me Grow*. This involved a commentary on the stages of development of children up to five years of age. The images reflected the lifestyle and parenting practices of outback families, both aboriginal and non-aboriginal. These were distributed to families and other mobile services and continue to be sold to community agencies and educational institutions outside the region.

Also produced were booklets to supplement the video series which were prepared by staff after consultation with parents. A *Who To Contact?* regional information guide was produced during 1992-93 for families requiring the services of multidisciplinary agencies in both New South Wales and Queensland. Storybooks set in the outback with titles such as *The Ultra Light* and *Billabong Bunyip* were published during the second phase. These provided the opportunity for children within the target region to recognise their identity as outback dwellers in literature. Car stickers and posters carrying child care messages also proved very popular, with phrases such as 'Hugs not Drugs', 'Smile and Kids Smile with You', et cetera.

To enable the service to reach the wider community, to Mobile team coordinated a daily *Contact with Kids* radio programme. The ten minute segment which included parenting ideas and information, discussion of health topics and children's songs and stories, was broadcast from 2WEB Outback Radio (Bourke). The listening area reached well beyond the project area into communities serviced by other Mobile units and into the wider south-west Queensland region.

It was envisaged that this segment would compensate for distance and inaccessibility and extend the session programme. After reassessment of the impact of the programme it was found that the 2.00 p.m. timeslot posed problems for children and mothers involved with the mobile to listen in. Fathers were found to listen more, since the radio was tuned in while they worked in shearing sheds or were driving. Over time the format changed, from being directed at children to targeting care givers. Interviews with early childhood and health professionals predominated, although the children's songs and birthday calls remained.

The regular travel into the studio, a 200 kilometres drive on one of the worst roads in New South Wales, and the time involved for the field team in planning and preparation took its toll on staff workers. The team was simultaneously endeavouring to establish a high profile service in the community, establish rapport with families in the target region, prepare session programmes, and travel to venues, often requiring overnight stays in the field. Their technical skills were at first limited and they lacked experience in radio presentation. Eventually a part-time radio presenter, based in Bourke, was employed to take over the coordination of the daily segment.

Dr Burns recommended that:

"... in setting up any similar scheme it would be useful to:

i) arrange pre-training workshops, and

ii stagger the introduction of services perhaps by concentrating initially on the radio programme, and introducing the Mobile service some time later."

A Resource Group was established to provide support and advice to the project team. It consisted of health and educational professionals living in larger centres outside the region, with representation from Queensland and New South Wales state government departments and a local Wanaaring resident.

This group liaised with the field workers and with their own constituency. They provided information which often proved relevant to the needs of the community. For instance, one unexpected outcome of input by a Resource Group member who was involved in Tertiary and Adult Further Education (TAFE) was that adult education Workshops in the region increased. The field team became involved in the coordination process at the local level and facilitated access to Further Education services by the target population.

Under Bernard van Leer Foundation guidelines, a training and professional networking component was written into the Workplan of the project from the outset. This enabled such forums for communication across disciplines and bureaucratic divisions to take place.

The Contact Mobile, under the umbrella of Contact Incorporated, has been closely involved in training, networking, and policy-making regarding rural and remote mobile children's services, both statewide and nationally.

Birdsville, April 1991:	The Australian National Remote Area Mobile Muster
Adelaide, May 1992:	Australian Remote and Isolated Children's and Family Service Mobile Muster
Little Wobby, August 1992:	Networking and Communication Seminar for New South Wales Projects funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation
Bourke, March 1993:	Borderlink Training and Networking Seminar (for Mobile and Distance Education Units delivering services to the NSW/Qld border region)
Canberra, May 1993:	Consultation of state representatives of rural an remote mobiles with Australian Government representatives.
Alice Springs, April 1994:	National Rural and Remote Mobile Muster

This involvement and the resulting reports and recommendations have gone some way in addressing the issues facing not only remote communities but those providing direct and indirect services to them.

These meetings, inservices and networking sessions enabled issues at the project level to be raised and comparisons and distinctions to be made between sometimes diverse services. For instance, the relatively long established Remote and Isolated Children Service (RICE) based in Port Augusta, South Australia, has a large team of trained health and educational workers utilising air, rail and road travel, as well as postal and radio services to reach remote communities within their state boundaries where there are children under five years of age. This project is accountable to two state departments and of course differs greatly from other small mobile units in other states who are sponsored by local committees. These smaller units may have only enough funding for two untrained workers who are endeavouring to provide a similar service to outlying communities.

Reports from the seminars include recommendations regarding community/government liaison, management structures, budget models, policy changes, and the specific needs of rural and remote families in varying circumstances. The Department of Community Services and Health prepared policy documents as early as 1987-

88 for Mobile Services. For these the establishment criteria of the Contact Children's Mobile was taken into account. Since then the Department of has given consideration to recommendations from Mobile Musters — the policy documents have been reviewed accordingly.

At the recent Alice Springs Mobile Muster, 1994, over thirty teams were represented from all over Australia, as well as commonwealth departmental offices in Canberra and other capital cities. Besides information exchange, professional development workshops and discussion of issues affecting targeted communities, a National Association of Rural and Remote Mobile Children and Family Services was established. This was the culmination of several years of Contact Incorporated's national networking and would not have been possible without the generous funding and support of the Bernard van Leer Foundation along with the Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health.

The Contact Children's Mobile, since July 1993, has continued into its third phase, the *transition phase*. The transition is a two-fold one. On one level the change is in the funding body, with Bernard van Leer Foundation handing over financial responsibility to the Australian Government. On another level, there is a planned change in the management structure. Some time after July 1993, it is envisaged that Sydney-based management, Contact Incorporated will hand over the practical management responsibility to a newly elected regional committee. The committee will consist of one elected representative from each of the nine service regions. Most meetings will take place via teleconference due to the vast distances between committee members.

Nothing has done more to empower service users than the funding crisis experienced during 1993. Foundation funding was due to end on June 30, and close to that date there had been no advice by the Australian Government regarding commitment of funds for the continuation of the project. This was despite a submission made over twelve months before.

As recorded in the Phase Two Summary Report (1980-1993):

> "Parents and community members were mobilised to lobby parliamentarians and were eager to support the mobile in this way. The crisis made clear the sense of 'ownership' of the mobile that both parents and children felt."

The Australian Government finally agreed to continue the provision of the mobile service to the 135 children by then enrolled. This was in the main due to the Minister's realisation that no other early childhood service existed in the region. The government had recognised its responsibility and commitment to provide families in the target region with access to services similar to that which their urban counterparts take for granted.

Mobiles are considered to be one of the most flexible and versatile family services, ideally suited to meet the needs of families with young children in remote and isolated areas of Australia where the pockets of population are too small to support centre-based services.

At the National Conference on Pre-School Education for Isolated Children in 1974[5] highlights a distinction between *rural dwellers* who are able to draw upon the services of a 'rural town' and *outback dwellers* who operate as a nuclear family and are totally dependent upon the limited resources within the homestead. The distinction between rural and outback dwellers still remains today.

Despite the electoral insignificance of these small settlements of outback dwellers, the children and their caregivers have a right to equitable access to services. Services such as the Contact Children's Mobile continue to provide resources for loan, parenting information and support. They also provide a regular catalyst for social interaction and educational and cultural experiences. Their flexibility enables the team to coordinate schedules and projects and liaise with other health and educational organisations who target services to the same region, e.g. Royal Flying Doctor Services, Schools of Distance Education, local public schools, and regional health workers.

The Contact Mobile will continue to work towards the aims as set, and to maintain liaison with local, state, and federal government bodies and other relevant agencies as a matter of priority. This way the quality of life of outback families may be enhanced by the opportunity of access to relevant services regardless of where the families are geographically situated.

REFERENCES

Contact Incorporated Publications

1 van Leer Contact Children's Mobile, Year I Annual Report 1987 - 1988.

2 van Leer Contact Children's Mobile, Year II Report July 1988 - June 1989.

3 van Leer Contact Children's Mobile, Phase I Summary Report 1987 - 1990. (Incorporating Year 3 Annual Report).

4 Proposal Submission for Funding, van Leer Contact Children's Mobile, Wanaanng, Australia. July 1990 - June 1995.

5 van Leer Contact Children's Mobile, Phase II, Year I Report 1990 - 1991.

6 Submission to The Department of Health, Housing and Community Services for funding to continue the Contact Children's Mobile, from 1/7/93. May 1992.

7 van Leer Contact Children's Mobile Phase-II Summary Report 1990 - 1993.

8 Report of The Australian National Remote Area Mobile Muster, Birdsville, 1991.

9 Report of the Remote and Isolated Children's and Family Services Mobile Muster, Adelaide 1992.

10 Report of the 1992 Networking and Communication Seminar for Contact Inc. and the Hunter Caravan Project. Little Wobby, Hawkesbury River 1992.

11 Report of the Borderlink Networking Seminar. Bourke 1993.

12 Report on the Canberra Consultation of Australian Mobile Remote and Isolated Children's and Family Service, April 1993.

[1] An area the size of Tasmania (or Belgium and the Netherlands together).

[2] Contact Inc. is the special ongoing NSW project from the International Year of the Child, 1979.

[3] Royal Flying Doctor Service, Broken Hill Base.

[4] cited van Leer Children's Mobile, Phase II Summary Report 1990-1993.

[5] Grant, Julie L: "The Effects of Isolation on Preschool Education Description and Analysis of the Queensland Preschool Correspondence Programme and the Teaching Styles of a Sample of Parents." Report of their National Conference on Preschool Education for Isolated Children. 1974.